

The Call of the Shrimp – Decepción pot 14/04/2023

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It was meant to be a reasonably simple trip to drop down this moderately difficult pothole, that now gives access to the remote regions of Cueva Hoyuca. It now takes only 3 hours rather than 6 to 8 with swimming to reach the rarely-visited and amazing Trident series that has a lot still to find. With the exception of our visit on Wednesday the 12th, these passages had not been entered since the 80s.

Today however, our intentions were to explore the less amazing but equally as remote area (until recently) called Shrimpbone Inlet, to survey a secondary branch leading off that we noticed whilst exiting on Wednesday.

So, we entered the new entrance (Torca la Decepción) that drops directly into Shrimpbone Inlet. However, this entrance is not straightforward. After a short crawl and a dug out passage one descends an initially restricted pitch of 40m down a muddy rift. After that a caver is forced through a flat out “mainly” dry ex-duck (322/1/6 Super Duck) that James had dug out previously. More awkward, twisting passage eventually leads to a second, far more dramatic 40m pitch down a large shaft. From here it’s just 30 minutes of easier caving to the connection to Hoyuca via a short pitch into Shrimpbone Inlet.

We had made reasonable time through this, taking just over an hour to get to the inlet of interest and set about surveying, when disaster struck (me). You see, I rather daftly (some may argue), took my phone caving in my over-suit pocket and it seems things can escape it rather easily. So, my phone did just that and fell 3m down a crack into the stream below the passage we were surveying. At the bottom, the passage was at most 8 inches wide with a 2 inch gap above that before the reaching the larger crawling passage we were in.

I was most distressed by this, but unfortunately my companions did not seem to want to help, as they were more interested in surveying than helping so I was largely left to it (though Chris at-least did fetch my rope). This was partly because surveying must be done, but largely because they thought my chances of getting my phone back with or without their help precisely 0% Or, perhaps they just don’t like me much, the reader will have to ask them!

The phone was unreachable and submerged in water a few inches deep, 3m below us, I knew it was somewhat waterproof, but it would likely not survive for long. Anyway, I was determined to get it. First, I tried hooking it with a rope snare – Result, I pushed it downstream 1m before it was in a worse position than before.

Then I tried scooping it into my bag – result, no change. The rift, even at water level, was too small for the bag to fit properly, even when I added a rock to weigh the bag down.

Finally, I tried knocking it upstream with my hand-jammer tied to the rope – result, no change, though the principle should work, without something rigid I just could not bring the force to bare to move it, neither was it accurate enough.

I concluded I needed something long and at least semi-ridged, with a length a bare minimum of 2m long. With that tool I could shove it upstream about 10m to where the rift was big enough to allow me to climb down and get it. But I had nothing like that! A stal – nah - despite my mood, I could not contemplate vandalising the cave for this. Besides it would be too brittle, anyway. The only thing I could think of was a stick, but there are no sticks in the cave of course!

The only sticks were on the surface, so I had to go and get one! So back up the two 40m pitches I went and forced myself yet-again through the grovelly passage. I emerged in daylight once more at 4pm(?) I was already feeling somewhat tired. While I was prussiking up the rope, I had already made my plan. I would need 2m as previously stated but it would have to be supple to survive the trip in the cave or heaven forbid a drop down one of the 40m pitches.

I located said branch a few meters from the cave entrance and proceeded to “borrow” it from the tree that it was attached to... for the next 10 minutes! A Petzl knife does not make a good saw. Branch in hand I returned once more to darkness, I used a bag left to de-rig the entrance pitch to try and hold the branch in-place wrapping the haul cord around it a few times. To my amazement this worked and me and the branch made it down the pitch safely despite my stop descender not opening due to grit.

I washed off the grit and proceeded through the gnarly passage with the branch which, thanks to it’s flexibility, was persuadable around some of the sharper bends. For the second pitch I used the same technique, this time however the branch did escape, but this was thankfully only 5m from the bottom and the heroic branch was unharmed.

I waltzed down the larger stream passage feeling like Gandalf from Lord of the Rings, thinking if I ran into the others I would shout “You shall not pass... until you help me” but I never met them. Arriving at the scene of the incident I found a note telling me where they had gone, as their survey work here was done and they had gone looking for other inlets upstream in Shrimpbone.

The phone was barely visible now, the water being murky from the explorations up-stream which made things even harder. Nonetheless, I set to work with the out-of-place stick tool. Slowly but surely, against the flow of the water that was working against me I pushed the phone upstream until eventual success. Even-more amazingly the phone still worked (though has somewhat died since).

I met the others on the way out who were impressed with me managing to get it out and all was left was to go out, going up those two pitches and gnarly passage once more for the 2nd time this day, it definitely felt more tiring the second time around.

They surveyed 90m in the inlet until the passage ended in a dismal, muddy sump and 90m in other passages. Trip time 7 hours, or in my case 3.5 hours and 3.5 hours. The branch remains in the cave, pointing in its forever vigil the way out from Shrimpbone Inlet. This new passage is named Shrimp Phone Inlet due to this day’s events.

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